**transcultural  
psychiatry****July  
2010**

ARTICLE

## Shared Death: Self, Sociality and Internet Group Suicide in Japan

**CHIKAKO OZAWA-DE SILVA***Emory University*

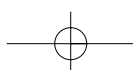
**Abstract** Existing models for understanding suicide fail to account for the distinctiveness of Internet group suicide, a recent phenomenon in Japan. Drawing from an ethnography of Internet suicide websites, two social commentaries in Japanese popular culture, and the work of developmental psychologist Philippe Rochat, I argue that participation in Internet suicide forums and even the act of Internet group suicide result from both a need for social connectedness and the fear of social rejection and isolation that this need engenders. These needs and fears are especially strong in the case of Japan, where the dominant cultural rhetoric ties selfhood closely to the social self that is the object of perception and experience by others. I show how such an understanding of Internet group suicide helps us to understand some of its basic characteristics, which are otherwise difficult to explain and which have puzzled the Japanese media and popular accounts: the “ordinariness” or casual nature of Internet group suicide, the wish for an easy or comfortable death, the wish to die with others, and the wish to “vanish.” Internet group suicide sheds light on questions of Japanese selfhood in modernity and expands our understanding of suicide in Japan in general.

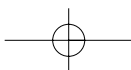
**Key words** basic affiliative need • Internet • Japan • self • social support • suicide

TRANSCULTURAL PSYCHIATRY Vol 47(3): 392–419. tps.sagepub.com

© The Author(s), 2010. Reprints and permissions: <http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav>

DOI: 10.1177/1363461510370239





OZAWA-DE SILVA: INTERNET GROUP SUICIDE IN JAPAN

## INTRODUCTION

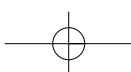
In this article I investigate the disturbing trend of Internet group suicide in Japan by examining the individual and social psychological aspects of Internet group suicide. Drawing from transcripts of suicide website discussion forums and two popular culture social commentaries, the animated television series *Paranoia Agent* and the film *Suicide Circle* (called *Suicide Club* in its North American release version), I argue that the recent phenomenon of Internet group suicide illustrates the powerful need for affiliation with others. While this affiliative need is universal, it is especially visible in the case of Japan, where the negotiation of social relationships is heavily shaped by the social self that is the object of perception and experience by others. An understanding of the social self can help us to understand some of the distinctive characteristics of Internet group suicide. The study of Internet group suicide therefore sheds light on the situation of contemporary Japan and also on questions of selfhood.

While the Internet has been blamed in Japan for exerting a negative influence on young people, for example by providing information on various suicide methods, it is also recognized as having created valuable new forms of communication and a “space” where people feel they belong. Some Japanese researchers even view the Internet as an important tool for suicide prevention. Japan’s major suicide prevention hotline, Life Line (*Inochi no denwa*), introduced Internet counseling alongside telephone counseling in 2006, out of a recognition that some young people with suicidal thoughts prefer interaction via the Internet. According to Life Line’s founder, more than 70% of those who chose online counseling are under the age 30 (Saito Yukio, personal conversation, May 2009). For the youth of the “Internet generation,” reliance on the Internet has been a part of everyday life and its role in social relationships and in suicide is therefore multifaceted and complex.

Although the majority of reported Internet group suicides have taken place in Japan, it should be noted that Internet suicide is not unique to Japan and need not be explained by an appeal to Japanese uniqueness. In fact, the first reported case of Internet group suicide took place in Korea (Cho, 2005, p. 17; Shibui, 2009) and cases have occurred in other countries, including Guam and the Netherlands (Wired Vision, 2006). In this article, Japan is used as a case study to examine this particular kind of suicide and some of its features, which may vary in other cultural contexts.

## THE EMERGENCE OF INTERNET GROUP SUICIDE

Japan has been going through a period of turmoil, as indicated in part by a sudden increase in suicide and depression rates since 1998 (Kitanaka,



*TRANS CULTURAL PSYCHIATRY* 47(3)

2006; Motohashi, 2006; Takahashi, 1999, 2001; Vickery, 2007). Since the sudden rise of suicide in 1998, the reasons for which are not entirely clear (Ozawa-de Silva, 2008), suicide prevention has become a major concern for the nation, but this has been focused mainly on suicide among middle-aged men, linking the increase in suicide to unemployment and Japan's long-term economic recession. The suicide rate in Japan was in the range of 18 to 19 per 100,000 individuals until 1998, but since 1998 it has been the second highest among the G-8 nations (for example, 26.0 in 1998 and 24.2 in 2005) after Russia (Jisatsutaisakugaiyou, 2006).

This rise in suicide has resulted in suicide becoming the leading cause of death among Japanese under the age of 30 (Takahashi, 2001). Although men between the ages of 40 and 54 make up a significant portion of total suicides in Japan, it is important to note that in 1998 the suicide rate among women under the age of 19 showed an increase of almost 70% over the previous year, and among men under the age of 19 there was a 50% increase in suicides – increases that can not as easily be tied, at least simplistically, to unemployment (Ozawa-de Silva, 2008; Takahashi, 2001). From 1994 to 1997 suicide among those under 30 ranged from 2800 and 2950. In 1998, it shot up to 3960 and has remained elevated ever since (The Cabinet Office, 2007). Thus, although the number of suicides among young people seems small when compared to the overall suicide rate, youth suicides have become a serious issue in Japan and there is growing public concern regarding this issue. In recent years, the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare has funded several research projects by the NIMH Center for Suicide Prevention to investigate this, including one specifically on Internet-related suicides among youth.

Prior to the sudden rise of suicide in 1998, when the number of suicides surpassed 30,000, the Japanese national and local governments had not devoted attention to suicide prevention. The year 1998, however, saw a change in public opinion, and there emerged the first public recognition of suicide as a public health problem, and suicide prevention as an important social issue (Cho, 2006; Motohashi, 2006). Traditionally known to be a culture that is tolerant of suicide (Cho, 2006; Ozawa-de Silva, 2008; Pinguet, 1993), Japan has finally begun to try to address suicide prevention as an important social issue. The Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, for example, started a government initiative in 2005 in order to lower suicide rates (Motohashi, 2006).

In addition to the sudden rise of suicide rates, another urgent social issue has been the emergence of a new type of suicide, namely Internet suicides. Although affecting a relatively small number of people compared to the total number of suicides, this new form of suicide has attracted both media attention and imitation, and has caused considerable alarm in Japan. The majority of victims of Internet-related suicide are Japanese in

## OZAWA-DE SILVA: INTERNET GROUP SUICIDE IN JAPAN

their 20s and 30s, and figures show a steady increase in suicides of this type since it was officially recognized as a distinctive category of suicide by Japanese police in 2003 (Con, 2006; Samuels, 2007). In some cases, these Internet suicides take the form of group suicides, or suicide pacts. Those engaging in Internet group suicides find each other by means of suicide websites that contain chat areas or discussion forums. They arrange to meet to commit group suicide. Up until 2008, they almost always followed the same method: carbon monoxide poisoning induced by burning charcoal briquettes in a small Japanese stove inside a car or apartment with the windows sealed up with tape. In January 2008, a new method of hydrogen sulfide poisoning became popular and the technique for creating the poisonous substance was circulated online. In that year alone, 1056 individuals committed suicide using this method; with the average age of the victims being 31.3 years old. Hydrogen sulfide has since been a preferred method for Internet group suicide as well as individual suicides.

It is not clear when the first Internet group suicide in Japan took place, as official police data have only been collected since 2003. According to Con, who counts both actual and attempted suicides, there was one case of Internet group suicide in 2002, 20 cases in 2003, 22 cases in 2004, and 26 cases in 2005 (Con, 2006). Con also suggests that the number of actual cases might be considerably higher depending on the reporting practices of Japanese police. According to official police records, which include only “successful” suicides and not attempted suicides, there were 12 cases of Internet group suicide (involving 34 people) in 2003, 19 cases (involving 55 people) in 2004, 34 cases (involving 91 people) in 2005, and 21 cases (involving 56 people) in 2006 (Shibui, 2007). Shibui, a journalist, notes that since 2003 the Japanese police have decreased their public reporting of Internet group suicide. According to Houzai, between the end of 2002 and the end of 2005, there were 69 cases of Internet group suicide, involving 204 people (124 men, 80 women) (Houzai, 2007). Of these, the large majority were in their 20s (52.6%) and early 30s (22.1%).

The first widely reported case of an Internet group suicide occurred in February 11, 2003, when a 26-year-old man and 2 women (both 24-years old) were found dead in an empty apartment. They were found lying side by side like the Japanese character for “river” (川), and beside them were numerous charcoal briquettes in a *shichirin* stove oven. All the windows were tightly sealed with scotch tape and they had died of carbon monoxide poisoning (Con, 2006; Ozawa-de Silva, 2008; Shibui, 2007). Prior to this case, however, a 30-year-old man and 32-year old woman had been found to have died by suicide in an empty apartment using exactly the same method. What was particularly sensational about the February 2003 case was that the dead bodies were discovered by a teenage girl, who had initially agreed to participate in the group suicide during an online chat,

*TRANSCULTURAL PSYCHIATRY* 47(3)

but who had then become scared and had not participated. Later, she became curious about what had happened, and visited the apartment, whereupon she discovered the bodies (Horiguchi & Akamatsu, 2005; Ozawa-de Silva, 2008, p. 526). Since this incident, the mass media have reported on Internet group suicide cases with detailed descriptions about the deaths as well as the existence of numerous suicide sites where individuals can gather to discuss suicide and even plan group suicides (Con, 2006; Horiguchi & Akamatsu, 2005; Shibui, 2007). Between February 11, 2003, and December 31, 2004, there were 599 articles on Internet group suicide in five major newspapers in Japan (Horiguchi & Akamatsu, 2005) and 156 television programs reported on the phenomenon (Horiguchi & Emoto, 2005). Several researchers responded by warning that such wide media coverage could lead to a chain reaction of more Internet suicides (Horiguchi & Akamatsu, 2005, p. 25; Takahashi, personal communication, May 2009).

## THE “SERIOUSNESS” OF INTERNET GROUP SUICIDE

Internet group suicide has been viewed as a new type of suicide and has met with varying responses within Japanese society. Once the police established Internet group suicide as a new category in their records, the government took action quickly. The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare requested and funded research on suicide prevention for Internet-related suicides (Takeshima, 2009; Ueda, 2005) and, in 2006, a Center for Suicide Prevention was established within the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) in Japan. Within the NIMH, 9 internal and 10 external researchers have conducted studies on Internet suicide and methods for its prevention. One of the NIMH reports expresses concern for the difficulty in preventing Internet-related suicide and the possibility of an increase in such forms of suicide (Horiguchi, Cho, Akamatsu, & Emoto, 2005). The report’s summary concludes that the victims of Internet suicide are primarily young Japanese who are frequent Internet users and that it results in a multiple-simultaneous suicide among strangers (Horiguchi et al., 2005, p. 51).

Despite the interest shown by the government, Internet group suicide has met with puzzlement from the Japanese public. In many cases, Internet group suicide has been treated publicly as a “non-serious” suicide, in the sense that the individuals involved had not sufficiently thought through their reasons to die. For example, Ikeda Haruhiko, a well-known biologist and social commentator, said in 2003, “I feel like saying ‘Don’t be so spoiled.’ What more does one say to someone without any ability to live another forty years?” (Asahi, 2003). Also in 2003, the journal *AERA* released a special issue entitled *Shi ni Itaru Wake* (Reasons to Reach Death)

## OZAWA-DE SILVA: INTERNET GROUP SUICIDE IN JAPAN

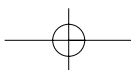
in which they published data based on interviews with a hundred Japanese teenagers aged 15 to 19 (AERA, 2003). In response to one question in the survey, "What are the reasons or occasions for you to think about dying?" a number of respondents replied with statements such as: "Just sort of (*nan to naku*) feeling bored," "I am tired of living," and "When I feel unsure about who I am." Such statements parallel closely the statements made by individuals who visit suicide websites. One individual in the study, who had attempted suicide, said, "When I think about it, it is not that I really wanted to die. I just wanted to pause from living. To have died or not to have died, either would have been all right" (AERA, 2003, p. 10). Responding to such statements, the psychologist and popular social commentator Kayama wrote, "There is a sense that dying or not dying is a kind of lottery. One sees neither a suicide of resolve to cross the border [i.e., to die] nor anything that can be pointed to as a reason. I cannot help but feeling that it is a matter of mood and timing. There is not even any sense of the desperation of really wanting to die" (AERA, 2003, p. 10).

Several scholars and social commentators have drawn a connection between the rise in suicides and the negative influence of the Internet on Japanese youth (Kagawa & Mori, 2004; Muta, 2004; Okonogi, 2005). Part of the reason for a negative attitude towards Internet group suicide seems to be the fear of contagion. A historical precedent for this exists in the Edo period when a rise in *shinjyū* or lover's double suicides resulted from a famous kabuki play by Chikamatsu Monzaemon. The Edo bakufu subsequently prohibited funerary services for individuals who died through *shinjyū* as a measure to curb the rising number of "copy-cat" suicides (Asakura, 2005). In both the Edo case and the current case of Internet group suicide, there is the sense that the "form" of the suicide spreads like an infectious disease and must therefore be contained.

The expressions of the individuals who visit suicide websites and contemplate Internet group suicide suggest the possibility of alternative interpretations, however. Their comments exhibit what I consider to be a distinctive kind of loneliness and demonstrate a sense of "disconnectedness" from others and from society that signals an existential suffering that may not be reducible to a psychiatric disorder.

The following poem is but one example, and illustrates the existential loneliness and need for recognition that is often characteristic of visitors to suicide websites:

What were my newborn hands grabbing?  
 Why am I never forgiven no matter what I do or where I am?  
 I don't recall doing anything wrong  
 It's as if I have been chased since I was a newborn baby  
 Someone please look at me and acknowledge me  
 Please acknowledge the fact that I am here



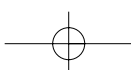
*TRANSCULTURAL PSYCHIATRY* 47(3)

Though I shouted and shouted  
 It did not reach anyone's ears  
 It's not that I asked for a lot  
 I just want my own place, even if it's small  
 I get laughed at whatever I do  
 I cannot complain no matter what is done to me  
 Even when I lose something precious, no one comforts me  
 The cold world keeps on turning as if nothing had happened  
 Where can I go to be in peace?  
 With whom can I be to be in peace?  
 I have had the feeling of being alone since I was little  
 Nothing I do mends this feeling  
 I am always just looking at the crowd  
 Someone please look at me and acknowledge me  
 Please acknowledge the fact that I am here  
 Though I shouted and shouted  
 It did not reach anyone's ears.<sup>1</sup>

**SUICIDE CLUBS AND AGENTS OF DELUSION: POPULAR CULTURE  
 REPRESENTATIONS OF INTERNET GROUP SUICIDE**

A number of social commentaries in recent years, in a variety of forms, from television series and feature films to books and online publications have taken stock of the condition of contemporary Japan and presented a bleak picture of its health. In contrast to "official" explanations of the rise of suicide in Japan, which center around Japan's economic stagnation and individual cases of pathology and depression, they suggest that the Japanese individuals who visit suicide websites, such as the author of the earlier poem, which was posted on one of the popular Internet group suicide websites, are not isolated pathological cases, but victims and signifiers of a deep malaise or "social pathology" that is afflicting Japanese society. The individual psychology of such victims, therefore, is seen as inseparable from a social psychology that is in need of change and healing.

Numerous Japanese films in the past decade have been social commentaries that reflect and meditate upon the social ills afflicting the country in the form of suicide, unemployment, family breakdown, and isolation (Buckley, 2009). Recent years have seen the production of a large number of films that deal specifically with the problem of suicide, such as *Suicide Circle* ([Suicide Club] 2002), *Ikinai* ([Not Going to Live] 1998), *Jisatsu Manual* ([Suicide Manual] 2002), *Gurowin, Gurowin* (2002), and *Tokyo Sonata* (2008). In particular, the film *Suicide Club* and the animated television series *Paranoia Agent* (2004) are especially interesting in drawing attention to Japanese perceptions of the cultural and social psychological processes that may be involved in Internet group suicide. I will focus on



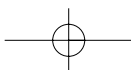
## OZAWA-DE SILVA: INTERNET GROUP SUICIDE IN JAPAN

these two films not only because they deal directly with suicide among youth, but also because they provide powerful social commentaries on the rise of group and Internet suicide in Japan. Both films present the interrelated themes of loneliness, connection with others, and the afterlife, which turn up repeatedly in comments made on suicide websites (Ozawa-de Silva, 2008).

Buckley (2009) devotes a significant portion of her preface to the *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Japanese Culture* to examining the parallels between popular culture representations and suicidal behavior in Japanese society, with particular attention to the recent films *Tokyo Sonata* and *Departures*. As she notes, “Whether the forum is film, the evening news, manga (comics), cell phone messaging, new fiction or reality TV, the contemporary platforms of cultural production and the circulations of the information economy mediate engagement with reality as they continue to impact and shape it” (Buckley, 2009, p. xxxv). Thus, while these two cases of popular culture are in fact highly dramatized, and are not to be taken as straight, factual representations of Internet group suicide itself, they do illustrate very well particular aspects of Internet group suicide that have captured the imagination of Japanese social commentators. This is especially important, because these are aspects that have largely been neglected in the approaches taken by the media and the government, but which, I will argue, are central to an understanding of Internet group suicide in Japan.

In 2002, writer-director Sono Sion released the film *Suicide Club*. Inspired by a group suicide in which Japanese teens jumped off the platform of the Yamanote subway station to their deaths, and possibly also by the AUM Shinrikyo sarin gas attack, the film is a scathing and highly disturbing social commentary on the issue of mass suicide and social malaise in post-bubble economy Japan.

The film begins with 54 schoolgirls holding hands on the platform of the Shinjuku subway station. When the train approaches, they say “one, two, three” and jump off the platform onto the tracks, killing themselves. When news comes in that other unexplainable suicides are occurring across the country on the same day, a team of detectives is assigned to investigate the matter. Two days later, a group of high school students are discussing the recent “teen group suicides,” and how this is the latest trend, while eating lunch on the roof of their school building. As a joke, they stand at the edge of the roof and imitate the schoolgirls who committed suicide at the train station, but after holding hands and saying “one, two, three” (as the schoolgirls in the subway station had done), a number of them actually jump off to their deaths. The remaining girls standing on the edge of the building look down in shock; then they too jump off and commit suicide, to the horror of the other students watching nearby.

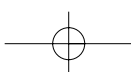
*TRANSCULTURAL PSYCHIATRY* 47(3)

As the detectives encounter more and more suicides, their investigation gradually seems to expose the hollowness of their own lives. When a family suicide claims the wife and children of one of the leading detectives himself, he receives a mysterious phone call from a young boy who asks him if he is “connected with himself” (*tsunagatte imasuka?*) Upon hearing this, the detective shoots himself in the head.

A television series that similarly takes up the serious theme of group suicide is *Paranoia Agent*, an animated production (*anime*) created by Kon Satoshi. The series aired from February to May 2004, and in it, Kon (known for his full-length animated films *Perfect Blue*, *Millennium Actress*, and *Tokyo Godfathers*) examines a cast of characters who are undergoing problems who reflect a number of Japan’s contemporary social ills.

The tone of this animation series seems to be that Japanese society is obliviously unaware of the disastrous state it finds itself in. The opening sequence of each episode depicts the main characters of *Paranoia Agent* – a cross section of Japanese society – smiling and laughing in various highly disturbing settings. A woman on the top of a tall city building holds her shoes in her hands (a symbol in Japan of being about to commit suicide by jumping off); two boys stand in the wreckage of a flood as it is taking place; a girl stands upright underwater and smiles, presumably in the process of drowning herself; and a school of fish swims comically by; a man laughs as he plummets head down through the sky to the earth; a man chatters into his cell-phone amidst the wreckage of demolished buildings after some kind of disaster or bombing; two women stand in the middle of a garbage dump; a man stands atop a power generator with a large mushroom cloud in the background; and, lastly an old man stands on the moon with the planet earth in the background, apparently with large-scale explosions registering across the surface of the earth. Meanwhile, the lyrics of the opening share the ironic tone of black comedy: “The lost children are a spectacular mushroom cloud in the sky/The lost children are comrades to the little birds that have infiltrated these lands/Touching the sun-kissed lawn with their hands/They are trying to speak with you/Dreams bloom atop benches in the apartment complex/Hold fate inside your heart/Quell your depression/Stretch your legs out towards tomorrow/Don’t worry about things like tidal waves . . .” (translation courtesy of <http://www.anime-kraze.com>).

The eighth episode of the series has an Internet suicide pact as its subject. Three individuals who had met on an Internet chat site meet in a public area with the intention of committing suicide together. However, the two men, Zebra (a young gay man) and Fuyubachi (an elderly man on medication) are shocked to see that their third member, Kamome, is not an adult, but a young girl of elementary school age. She is excited to see them and addresses them in a bubbly manner, but they run away and



## OZAWA-DE SILVA: INTERNET GROUP SUICIDE IN JAPAN

manage to evade her, despite her protestations, horrified at the idea of committing suicide with a child. They then go to an abandoned building, where they burn charcoal in a *shichirin* stove with the intention of dying of carbon monoxide poisoning. They also take a number of tablets, which appear to be sleeping pills, and lie down on the floor. However, they are awakened by Kamome's arrival and the demolition of the building they are in by a wrecking crew.

Upset at having failed to commit suicide, the three then go to a subway station with the intention of hurling themselves before an oncoming train. However, before they can jump off, another young man jumps onto the tracks and is killed by the oncoming train. As further attempts to kill themselves likewise fail, the three begin to lament their inability to die. Finally, when the old man Fuyubachi decides to take his pill he notices that there is just one left. This strikes him (and the viewer) as strange, as earlier in the episode he had been shown taking his last pill. At that moment they hear the loud sound of black crows flying by them, and the old man is shocked by a sudden realization. The viewer may also realize at this moment, together with Fuyubachi, that the three of them are in fact already dead, and have been wandering as spirits or ghosts. Presumably, they all died earlier in the building through the carbon monoxide poisoning, as after that moment their bodies cease to cast shadows on the ground. The episode ends with the three of them happily parading along together and scaring some tourists by jumping behind them during the taking of a photograph. The tourists take no notice of them while the photo is being taken, but are shocked when they look at the image in their digital camera, another clue to the viewer that the three main characters are now ghosts.

Irony operates on many levels in the episode, most clearly in the idea that a group of dead people keep trying to kill themselves and get frustrated at their failure to do so, but also in the idea that the characters are depicted as happy when they realize they are in fact dead. None of the characters is depicted as mentally disturbed (in the sense of having some kind of severe depression or psychosis); rather, they are depicted as ordinary people engaging in out-of-the-ordinary activities. Even their attempt at group suicide is depicted as if they were just going for a picnic, with the young girl not wanting to be left behind. Although no clear reason is ever given for their wanting to die, some hints indicate that they are all suffering from a severe loneliness. The young girl Kamome is constantly terrified that the other two will leave her behind, and insists on following them everywhere, clearly deriving great comfort from their company. Zebra wears a heart-shaped locket containing a picture of himself with another man, presumably an ex-lover. Fuyubachi is depicted as a lonely old man with a medical condition. Their ordinariness is colored by the fact that they seem to have nothing to live for, and hence see death as a blissful

*TRANSCULTURAL PSYCHIATRY* 47(3)

release – but a release into what? Their joyous frolicking at the end of the episode is also extremely ironic, since nothing has changed in their condition at all (they were wandering around dead for most of the episode) except that they now seem to feel that having died, they are free. As ghosts they cannot be seen, suggesting that their feeling of liberation is due to a freedom from society, social roles and expectations, evaluation, and the burdensome gaze of others.

**CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERNET GROUP SUICIDE AND  
EPICUREAN SUICIDE**

In drawing out some of the distinctive aspects of Internet group suicide, I want to begin by focusing on how the people who engage in group suicide in *Paranoia Agent* and *Suicide Club* are all portrayed as “ordinary people,” rather than depressed, highly stressed, or tormented individuals who are driven to kill themselves, who are somehow pathological and out of their minds, or who are otherwise in extreme and unusual circumstances. This depiction is concordant with the results of my own research on the visitors of Internet suicide sites since 2003. Even though it is difficult to determine whether suicide website visitors have or lack severe psychiatric conditions, they commonly make comments to the effect that “There is nothing wrong with my life. It is not that I am facing any economic hardships or anything like that, but I just do not know the reason to keep living” (Ozawa-de Silva, 2008). Sentiments such as “It is not that I want to die, but I also do not want to live” indicate an ordinariness to their situation that defies common accounts of suicidal individuals, which tend to portray suicide as a dramatic act of last resort or a plea for help. Neither are they “suicides of resolve,” which are morally motivated suicides that emerge due to immediate, tangible and pressing circumstances. There is no doubt, however, that they are experiencing existential suffering and that this generalized dysphoric state, which is not reducible to mental illness or depression, seems to be connected in the minds of many Japanese with the state of Japanese society itself.

A second distinguishing mark of these suicides is the need of the presence of others in order to die. *Paranoia Agent* depicts the three suicidal individuals as meeting over the Internet and then traveling from place to place together, deriving a sense of comfort, apparently, from each others’ company. When the little girl is left behind by the two men, she is clearly distressed by this. In my previous study of suicide websites, I found numerous comments stating things such as “I am too lonely to die alone” and “It could have been anyone to die with” (Ozawa-de Silva, 2008).

This then leads to the third point, which is the wish to die in comfort. In line with the “ordinariness” of the suicides, there is a wish to die in as

## OZAWA-DE SILVA: INTERNET GROUP SUICIDE IN JAPAN

painless and easy a manner as possible. The ideal, as noted, is to merely “vanish.” This seems weaker than the idea of suicide as a desperate “plea for help,” which is a common way of understanding suicide in the US, and suggests that a different mentality may be underlying this particular form of suicide.

Samuels writes of the similarities between this type of suicide and seeking the rest of sleep, a theme that emerges in *Paranoia Agent*: “‘Where did they get the idea of using charcoal?’ I asked. ‘There were rumors on the Internet that to die from briquettes was to die in your sleep,’ the young reporter, handsome and open-faced, with a touch of adolescent acne, explained. ‘It was a very painless way to go.’” (Samuels, 2007). Similarly, many of the posts I came across on suicide websites expressed the wish of their authors to “vanish” as if they had never existed, or a wish to take a pause from their everyday suffering.

A last point concerns the very notion of the individual’s choice or decision to die. Elsewhere, I have noted: “In contrast to the popular Japanese discourse that suicide is one way that individuals can assert their autonomy in a collectivist Japanese society, suicide pacts seem to involve individuals giving up, or subordinating, their autonomy to a collective decision, a group choice” (Ozawa-de Silva, 2008). Consider these two comments found on suicide websites: “I have been wanting to die and have been thinking about suicide methods. Please let me die with you” (*Ikizurasa kei no foramu*, September 15, 2006). “If it is all right with you, would you like to die with me?” (*Ikizurasa kei no foramu*, September 14, 2006)

Susan Long points out that in Japan death with a “peaceful face” is considered a good death, while *kodoku na shi* (“lonely death”) is of great concern (Long, 2001, p. 273). The three aspects of Internet group suicides that I have drawn out here – ordinariness, the wish to die with others, and the wish to die in comfort – are consistent with traditional views on what constitutes a good death in Japan. Here, I find Kleinman’s statement important: “Suicide is a medical issue; but it is also an economic, social relational, moral, and as September 11’s tragic global spectacle of suicide terrorist attack made clear, a political issue as well. Suicide prevention, in turn, holds mental, social, psychological, economic, moral and political significance” (Kleinman, 2002, p. x). The moral dimension of suicide mentioned by Kleinman relates to the congruence between the characteristics of Internet group suicide and Long’s description of what constitutes a “good death” in Japan. In contrast to common perceptions of suicide in the US, the condemnatory negative moral valence associated with suicide is barely present on suicide forums. Instead, the tone of the website posts is often more in line with the depiction of the characters in *Paranoia Agent* – one of lightness, a floating movement towards death. Thus, there is a split in the moral judgment of Internet group suicides between the critical

stance adopted by the media and social critics (as seen in the comments quoted earlier) and the stance of popular culture social commentaries such as *Suicide Club*, *Paranoia Agent* and many others, where the moral blame for the suicides is targeted more at society itself rather than the individuals who are the victims of suicide. Of the two, the depictions of the popular culture social commentaries seem closer to the experiences and feelings expressed by the individuals who frequent Internet suicide forums.

Given these characteristics of Internet group suicide, we might ask how new this phenomenon really is. Group suicide is not itself new in Japan, although the use of the Internet to communicate with others and plan a group suicide with others clearly is, as is the use of carbon monoxide poisoning from the *shichirin* stoves. Apart from these aspects, however, many of the characteristics of Internet group suicide in Japan resonate strongly with Durkheim's notion of "egoistic suicide," which results from an insufficient integration of the individual into society, and specifically with his subcategory of "Epicurean suicide."

Durkheim's work on suicide has been highly influential in Japan, and numerous researchers refer to Durkheim's categorization of suicide in discussing Internet group suicide in Japan (Cho, 2006, p. 21; Pinguet, 1993; Sadakane 2007; Shimizu, 2005). Durkheim's insight into the correlation between changes in society and suicide rates seems to appeal strongly to the sense within Japan that a change in Japanese society is the cause of the elevated rates of suicide and the *sine qua non* of achieving a solution to the problem. In addition to approaching suicide from the perspective of social factors, Durkheim's work remains influential because his notion that individuals are inseparable from society fits with Japanese conceptions (Durkheim, 1951).

Traditionally, suicide has been considered an expression of an individual's free will in Japan (Cho, 2006; Takahashi, 1997, 2001). The rhetoric of a "suicide of resolve," still a very popular notion, suggests that suicide can be the result of a rational decision by a freely choosing individual, and therefore is an option to be respected when necessity calls for it (Kitanaka, 2006, 2008). Kitanaka argues "though psychiatry has been institutionally established in Japan since the late nineteenth century, psychiatrists have had little impact on the way Japanese have conceptualized suicide. This may be because Japanese have long normalized suicide, even aestheticizing it at times as a culturally sanctioned act of individual freedom" (Kitanaka, 2008, p. 1). Maurice Pinguet (1993) has also famously noted how suicide tends to be romanticized in Japan.

Within egoistic suicide, Durkheim notes two subvariants. One is the egoistic suicide of the intellectual; Durkheim gives the example of the protagonist of Lamartine's *Raphäel* who enters a "spiritual isolation"

## OZAWA-DE SILVA: INTERNET GROUP SUICIDE IN JAPAN

(Durkheim, 1951, p. 280), but we might equally place here the existentialists who through increasing introspection conclude that life is meaningless and end it in a dramatic and often violent signaling of the absurdity of existence. The other type of egoistic suicide, which Durkheim calls "Epicurean" after the Greek philosopher, is "more commonplace" (Durkheim, 1951, p. 282) and "Instead of reflecting sadly on his condition, the person makes his decision cheerfully" (Durkheim, 1951, p. 282). The Epicurean suicide is prepared "to terminate a thenceforth meaningless existence" (Durkheim, 1951, p. 282). At the time of death, Durkheim writes, "The sufferer deals himself the blow without hate or anger, but equally with none of the morbid satisfaction with which the intellectual relishes his suicide. He is even more passionless than the latter. He is not surprised at the end to which he has come . . . he only tries to minimize the pain" (Durkheim, 1951, p. 282). Rather than seeking out a dramatic, violent and painful death, or engaging in tortured intellectual contemplation, such individuals, Durkheim (1951, p. 282) writes, "kill themselves with ironic tranquility and a matter-of-course mood". Durkheim's category of Epicurean suicide can be helpful in analyzing the case of Internet group suicides in Japan. Several of the explanations advanced to account for Internet group suicide, such as bullying at school, anger at one's parents, and so forth do not address its matter-of-factness and the apparent lack of anger at the time of death.

Kirmayer (2002) notes that Japanese culture positively values sadness and grief as the appropriate response to the recognition of impermanence and loss. He writes, "Sadness and depression may be given positive social meanings as yielding enhanced awareness of the transient nature of the world" (Kirmayer, 2002, p. 295). However, it is clear at the same time that these suicides, while characterized by ordinary sadness and loss, are not examples of the development of moral personhood or spiritual awareness; nor are they viewed that way in Japanese society. On the contrary, as noted, Internet group suicides have been viewed by the public and in the media as incomprehensible, shocking, and deplorable; they have been partially responsible for the increasing push within Japan to develop effective means of suicide prevention. Thus, Kirmayer's observations may help us to understand the background of why Japan has been so slow to develop policies to address suicide and depression. Japanese culture may have been more tolerant of the mental states associated with intellectual egoistic suicide, namely an investigation of one's existential state, but is now becoming aware that Internet group suicide reflects a very different mental state more closely aligned to Epicurean suicide. In the case of Internet group suicide, Kirmayer's observations help us understand how suicide can be the result of mental, emotional, and social states that are distinctive and not reducible to the individual pathology of clinical depression.

*TRANSCULTURAL PSYCHIATRY* 47(3)

Internet group suicide shares many elements of Epicurean suicide, and this helps to shed light on its factors of “ordinariness” and “the wish to die in comfort.” However, Durkheim’s theory does not fully address the question of “the wish to die with others,” which is the most perplexing characteristic of Internet group suicide. Here, a few factors need to be addressed, the most important of which is the importance of particular norms of sociality in Japanese society and the role they play in concepts of the self.

**SHARING A WORLD AND THE SELF THAT IS SEEN**

The idea that Japanese psychology is characterized by a sociocentric or interdependent construal of selfhood and that western psychology is characterized by an individualistic construal of selfhood has been a topic of investigation and debate for some time now in both cultural psychology and anthropology (Kondo, 1990; Lebra, 1982; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Shimizu & Levine, 2001). It is important to differentiate between different cultural conceptions of selfhood, on the one hand, and different kinds of selfhood or different selves, on the other. To speak of the former is to recognize how beliefs, values, and practices can powerfully shape experience. However, it is misleading to speak of an interdependent Japanese “self” in contrast to a western individualistic “self,” as though these were ontological realities. Recently, scholars have pointed out the need for a more differentiated understanding of selfhood that acknowledges individual differences as well as the degree to which individuals may share both individualistic and interdependent notions of selfhood in complex ways (Suizzo, 2004). For example, Shimizu points out that individualistic and sociocentric notions of selfhood should be acknowledged as “mutually and dynamically constituting elements of the individual’s personal experience” (Shimizu, 2001b, p. 206).

Recognizing the complexities of selfhood while also acknowledging the important ways in which Japanese construals of self-other relations can be markedly different from those common in North America requires developing a more sophisticated terminological understanding of selfhood that will no doubt take some time. In this section, I would like to explore one specific dimension of selfhood relevant to understanding Internet group suicide, namely the conception of selfhood that is constructed through the perceptions of others, or what I call “the self that is seen.” This is in contrast to the conception of selfhood that is constructed as an unseen interiority, “the self that is not seen.” The self, in other words, can be objectified and reified in various ways, and two key ways are as something that is primarily constructed through the perceptions of others, and as something that is constructed through processes that the individual

## OZAWA-DE SILVA: INTERNET GROUP SUICIDE IN JAPAN

considers his or her “own” and independent of others (e.g., motivations, beliefs, autobiographical information, and so on). I would argue that selfhood in both North American and Japanese societies is constructed in both ways among all individuals. However, the fact that North American rhetoric concerns itself largely with an internal, independent conception of selfhood, and Japanese rhetoric focuses more on the social dimension of selfhood (the self that is seen), indicates that there is a cultural difference in terms of emphasis. In social interaction, the perceived interests of self and other must be negotiated, and here Japanese culture places a stronger emphasis on acknowledging the interest of others, which may account for the stronger emphasis on the socially-perceived self. Thus, differences between “collectivist” societies like Japan and “individualist” societies in the so-called west may be better understood as reflecting differences in the emphasis placed on the private versus the public dimensions of selfhood.

Of course, western scholars have argued for recognition of the more socially constructed aspect of selfhood. In a recent article, the developmental psychologist Philippe Rochat outlines the features of what he calls “the basic drive to be acknowledged in one’s own existence through the eyes of others,” or, more simply, the “basic affiliative need” (Rochat, 2009b, p. 314). This is a need for mutual recognition and acknowledgment, and it is basic because, in his words, “we essentially live through the eyes of others. To be human . . . is primarily to care about how much empathy, hence acknowledgment and recognition of our own person, we generate in others – the fact that we care about our reputation as no other animal species does” (Rochat, 2009b, p. 306). From very early on developmentally, he writes:

Sociality or the quality of being sociable is inseparable from the elusive feeling of being included and having a causal role or impact on the life of others. It is about being “connected,” ultimately about being visible rather than invisible, recognized rather than ignored or ostracized . . . In this view, sociality rests on *mutual recognition*. (Rochat, 2009b, p. 308)

Rochat goes so far as to say that “The need to be recognized ultimately drives social cognition” (Rochat, 2009b, p. 306).

Rochat’s argument is that knowledge about the self comes largely from interaction with others, and that the self is constituted through relations with others. This kind of development of self-knowledge is no doubt universal, but the dimension of the self that exists in relationship with others and that exists as “the self that is seen by others” plays a particularly strong role in defining social relationships in Japanese society. The mere fact that scholars from Cooley (1983), G. H. Mead (1934) and Heidegger (1927/1962) to contemporary scholars such as Rochat have

## TRANSCULTURAL PSYCHIATRY 47(3)

gone to such great lengths to show the importance of sociality in the development of the self itself indicates that this line of thinking is something that is not taken for granted in western thought. The background assumption against which such scholars are articulating their viewpoints is the idea that the individual is a person who does not depend on others; that the self exists separately from others. This idea of an individual self that exists apart from others, and of a society that is the coming together of such originally-free individuals through a form of social contract, is a culturally and historically specific development, given voice in the writings of Rousseau and Locke (Taylor, 1989). Correspondingly, it is not uncommon for the North American ideology of selfhood to include ideas such as, "What you see is not the real me" – in other words, a claim that there is a fundamental break in the chain of signification from a perception of my outer appearance to knowledge of my "inner" being.

In contrast, the background assumption in Japanese thought is that the self is the relational self that exists in dependence upon others, and that is seen by others. Numerous scholars have noted the importance placed in Japan on interpersonal relationships and the way in which one is viewed by others. Doi (1971) writes of the importance of *amae* or "dependency" in Japanese social relations, a wish to be indulged and to be loved. Although, Doi concluded that *amae* exists cross-culturally and is not specific to Japan, he thought it significant that Japanese had a word for this mode of social interaction whereas English did not, and he felt that Japanese used and related to *amae* differently than "westerners." Nakane (1967) uses the term "vertical society" (*tate shakai*) to capture the structural principle behind group cohesion in Japan and to point to the way in which individuals' sense of self is rooted within a group. Similarly, Kimura (1972) develops related notion of the "space between people" (*hito to hito no aida*), and Hamaguchi (1982) uses the concept of "interpersonal relationships" (*kanjin shugi*) to capture the highly interdependent nature of social interaction in Japan.

Each of these concepts articulates in its own way the basic affiliative need and fear of social rejection. Thus, Mead's observation that "the individual mind can exist only in relation to other minds with shared meanings" (Mead, 1982, p. 5) and Rochat's insistence that, "within months of birth, the self is increasingly defined in relation to others, not on the basis of an interior subjective experience" (Rochat, 2009, p. 8) have a particular resonance within Japanese culture. It is already innately understood that who I am is who I am to other people; I exist in relation as someone seen and experienced by others. The novel idea, by way of contrast, would be that I could exist independently. The difference is one of emphasis and deployment, not a fundamental difference in selfhood; there is a cultural difference in terms of what Bourdieu (1977) might call

## OZAWA-DE SILVA: INTERNET GROUP SUICIDE IN JAPAN

the *doxic* position, namely that position which is culturally taken for granted and therefore remains typically beyond the domain of conscious analysis. In Japan, the idea that a person could be a self-sufficient, self-made individual is the more striking, innovative, or unusual position. The greater emphasis on the socially constructed nature of selfhood evident in Japan results in a correspondingly greater emphasis on the importance of intersubjectivity and what might be called “sharing a world.” This is a dynamic process of mutual interaction that is deeper than mere surface level imitation or mirroring; it is participation in the collective dance or ritual that forms the foundation of sociality and society itself.

If we put together the developmental model offered by Rochat (and building from the work of Cooley, Mead, and others), which shows that the self emerges from the very beginning already with a dual nature of being both individual and interdependent, together with our understanding of cross-cultural differences between western and Japanese societies, then we see more clearly how cultures are emphasizing and making salient different aspects of the dual-natured sense of self. This enables us to appreciate and recognize cultural differences while refraining from making the mistake of positing an ontological difference in selfhood between Japanese and “westerners.”

Ironically, awareness of the relational nature of self and the importance of “sharing a world” does not necessarily lead to only positive effects. This is because whether the self is objectified in dependence on internal or external perceptions, it is still a reification of self-concept that can lead to all the disappointments, disillusionments, tensions and fears that accompany such a rigidly adhered-to notion of “who I really am.” Rochat notes that the basic affiliative need and other-dependence of self-consciousness results in a fear of social rejection that he labels “the mother of all fears” (Rochat, 2009a). It is possible that the more the self is objectified on the basis of the perceptions of others, the greater this fear of social rejection would become. Indeed, the fear of social rejection seems particularly prevalent in Japan, where a proscription or prohibition of individual experience translates into the fear and felt intolerability of being “left behind” or “left out,” and where the great importance placed on maintaining shared experience takes priority over, and downplays, individual experience and autonomy.

Drawing from his interviews with Japanese adolescents, Shimizu notes how even slightly critical comments can be seen as taboo because they are a potential danger to group collectivity. One teenage boy explained it in this way: “when I had this person I didn’t like and told my friend A how badly I think of him, he said, ‘I didn’t know you were that kind of person to say something like that.’ Then I felt that I lost A’s trust in me” (Shimizu, 2001b, p. 219). In another interview with an adolescent girl, Shimizu asks

her, "What's the most important thing to do in interpersonal relationships?" She responds: "To go along with others (*hito ni awaseru*)" (Shimizu, 2001a, p. 12).

This dimension of selfhood and the effects it has on interpersonal relations are important factors in understanding group suicide. The intolerability of being "left behind" is something that is not only felt for oneself, but also projected onto others; this is seen in forced-suicides, when a father commits suicide and kills the remaining family members or when a mother commits suicide and kills her baby at the same time (*shinjyu*) (Takahashi, 1998). Culturally, such *shinjyu* is considered suicide in Japan. The idea of *amae* also plays a crucial role in such suicides: the mother cannot conceive that the baby could live independently of her; the husband cannot conceive of his wife living independently of him; so they commit suicide and kill the other. The fact that society understands these deaths not as murder-suicides, but simply as suicides (or collective suicides), is evidence of the acceptance of *amae*-relationships as well as the inherently social and shared nature of experience, what we might call the intersubjectivity of experience. Such suicides are an example of intersubjective death, shared death.

If I believe that there is an interior self that is my true self and that it is disconnected from the self that is the object of perception by others, then how others perceive me will matter much less, because I can say, "What you see is not me." However, if there is a connection between the self that is the object of perception by others and who I fundamentally am, or to be more accurate, if I do not introduce a kind of ideological distinction between the "who" I am (some kind of interior core self that exists separately from others, that is inaccessible to others) and the "whom" that others perceive, then there is no break in the chain of signification. Whom others see and who I am participate much more fully in each other – although they are not identical, as shown in Shimizu's examples (Shimizu, 2001b). Thus, appearance and behavior in public take on a much greater significance in Japan, with more social pressure to appear and behave in a particular way, with implications for fashion, clothing, hairstyle, etc. Thus, in his book on *hikikomori*, socially withdrawn individuals who spend months or years at home, taken care of by their families, Zielenziger (2006) writes of the feeling of being watched in Japanese society, not as a form of paranoia, but merely as the experience of living in a society in which the observation and judgment of behavior and appearance takes place at a higher level of significance, precisely because of the chain of signification that connects appearance with individual selfhood.

Many scholars working on suicide have noted the importance of social support as a preventive factor. The Japanese psychiatrist Takahashi has called the establishment of *kizuna* (bond, connection) essential to suicide

## OZAWA-DE SILVA: INTERNET GROUP SUICIDE IN JAPAN

prevention and considers its absence to be highly dangerous (Takahashi, 1997, 1999, 2001). Joiner, too, considers a sense of isolation or “non-belongingness” to be one of the three strongest risk factors for suicide (Joiner, 2005). Baumeister and Leary similarly write that, “the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497), and they note that “Perhaps most generally, general well-being and happiness in life depend on having some close social ties” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 510). Niezen (2009) argues along similar lines in his study of suicide clusters among Canadian Aboriginal youth when he writes that they are “driven by profound loneliness, neglect, or a sense of being unimportant and invisible, while, at the same time, this condition of loneliness becomes directly or indirectly shared with others” (Niezen, 2009, p. 179). Certainly, the virtually identical way most Internet group suicides are conducted and the common, repeated themes of a “beautiful death,” “dying with ease,” and “dying with others” suggest that Internet group suicide is influenced by what has been called “suicide contagion” (Kral, 1994). Whereas suicide contagion and cluster suicides sometimes have been seen as restricted to small communities, the Internet and suicide websites may be serving to create online communities in which mimesis can lead to suicide pacts in a less geographically restricted way.

The case of Internet group suicide in Japan highlights the importance of conceptions of self and the fact that the objectification of a “self that is seen” and its dependence upon perceived acceptance by others plays a crucial role in both a sense of belongingness and a fear of social rejection. On Internet suicide sites, the need to belong often emerges explicitly through references to *ibasho* or “a space to belong to.” When a person posts a first message, he or she often receives a kind response from other site regulars to the effect of “Everything is okay now. Please feel that this place is your *ibasho*” – again suggesting that Internet suicide communities can play both a supportive role in suicide prevention as well as a more nefarious role in enabling Internet group suicides.

Crucially, however, if in Japanese society the construction of selfhood is weighted more towards a dependence upon the perceptions and judgments of others – the self that is seen – then this greater emphasis on social cognition may require interventions that take this into account. The intuition of the Japanese public and government that suicide in Japan has become a social pathology and therefore requires changes in society may therefore have a degree of validity. With this understanding of selfhood, we see that the need to share a world can have both positive and negative dimensions. On the one hand, it can fulfill the basic affiliative need and provide a source of comfort and support. On the other hand, it can represent a social pressure to “go along with others” and to conform to group norms and behaviors. That social pressure can become overpowering

*TRANSCULTURAL PSYCHIATRY* 47(3)

and lead to the wish to “vanish” from the overburdening gaze of others. In some cases, this can manifest as *hikikomori*, and in others, as the phenomenon of Internet group suicide.

**CONCLUSION: THE NEED FOR OTHERS**

The need for others is a recurring theme in the expressions of suicidal individuals on the Internet. Moreover, it has a dual dimension. Those who seek out others over the Internet with whom to commit group suicide are not willing to commit suicide on their own; they need others. However, they also often express the need to be *needed by others*, and that being needed by someone else would provide a sense of meaning to their life. Their need of others is therefore both a need for the presence of others, and the need of the others, who in turn need them. In an Internet suicide pact, each individual may be experiencing these needs reciprocally with the other members. Thus, a key difference between Internet group suicides and individual suicides is the role of sociality in the suicide act and the events leading up to it, such as the establishment of contact, the planning of the suicide, and the meeting and carrying out of the plan. When two or more individuals are involved in any activity, and especially when they are intending a similar outcome, there is co-regulation, the potential for reciprocity, the creation of shared meanings and experiences, and the creation of a relationship on the basis of these shared meanings and experiences – the sharing of a world.

The lines of the poem from the suicide website underscore Rochat’s (2009b) argument that a lack of recognition – one could say *regard* – from others is a lack on the fundamental basis of what it means to be a human being and what it means to be a person, a “self.” As he writes, “Social comfort thus consists in the experience of being recognized as much as we recognize the other. Inversely, social discomfort is the experience of being transparent or invisible for others, the experience of not being acknowledged, hence socially disconnected.” (Rochat, 2009b, p. 314) This perspective enables us to consider that the question of *ikigai* (what is one’s “worth of living”), which I discussed elsewhere in connection with Internet group suicide (Ozawa-de Silva, 2008), is not – when considered as an existential question – itself primary, but rather the *symptom* of a decrease in the sense of affiliation and connectedness with others. It is this loss of affiliation that leads to a loss of meaning that itself becomes the cause for a questioning of one’s *ikigai*; this necessarily must be so, because the meaning of the self lies in its relations with others. As long as one is integrated, affiliated, connected, these questions simply do not arise, for just as a part of the body need not question its meaning as long as it remains a part of the body, but has no meaning apart from the body, so an individual takes his

## OZAWA-DE SILVA: INTERNET GROUP SUICIDE IN JAPAN

or her meaning from being in a collective and embedded in relationships, but cannot find a meaning for him- or herself once isolated from that collective and separated from those relationships. The dependent nature of the meaning of the self is not something that can be escaped, even in suicide. As strange as it may seem, even Internet group suicide is a way of for two or more suicidal individuals to share a world and participate in a shared death, a transition from this life of suffering to the next life.

From the current studies on suicide, it is clear that both social and psychological factors must be considered when investigating the causes of suicide. Nevertheless, While psychological studies of suicide tend to focus on individual psychopathology as a cause and sociological studies emphasize social causes, a cross-cultural perspective on suicide shows that the causes of suicide must themselves be understood as participating in cultural representations of suicide, and therefore as reflecting the dominant cultural rhetorics of suicide. Thus, the very important question of what constitutes a legitimate reason to commit suicide can only be answered within a specific cultural and moral context, and what seems legitimate in one culture may seem trivial in another. Even Durkheim himself fell prey to a lack of awareness at of cultural context at times. Writing of Japan, China, Tibet and Siam, he stated, "The readiness of the Japanese to disembowel themselves for the slightest reason is well known . . . Since here not clinging to life is a virtue, even of the highest rank, the man who renounces life on least provocation of circumstances or through simple vainglory is praiseworthy" (Durkheim, 1951, p. 222).

This is clearly a mischaracterization. The lack of "praiseworthiness" attributed by the Japanese public to the victims of Internet group suicide shows that it is neither vainglory nor the "least provocation of circumstances," but rather provocations that are culturally salient, that enable society to accept and even, in certain circumstances, praise acts of suicide. Internet suicide does not appear on the surface to be the result of a clear intention or motivation, which is partially why it is viewed critically as "callous." However, a motivation is "clear" only if it is easily understood by other people; there may be motivations that are more or less communicable within a cultural context. Furthermore, assigning motivations to suicides can at times be nothing more than the ascription of culturally accepted meanings and representations to acts that are in reality much more ambiguous and multifaceted and even potentially beyond the ability of the suicidal individuals themselves to fully describe. The transcript of the online discussion I quoted from above indicates that the private experiences of individuals considering Internet group suicide are considered by them to be unintelligible to outsiders, but they are not unintelligible among themselves and among those who share their feelings of loneliness, despair, and the "wish to vanish."

## TRANSCULTURAL PSYCHIATRY 47(3)

From this we see that although Durkheim's description of Epicurean suicide fits the case of Japanese Internet group suicide in some ways, his explanation of its causes may be less appropriate. The case of Internet group suicide indicates that rather than coming from an excessive individualism, Epicurean suicide may be due to the basic affiliative need being insufficiently met. The framing of self and society that is inherent to Durkheim's explanation (which conceives the possibility of an individual/society dyad) may not capture the particular way self concept is constructed in Japanese society, with its greater emphasis on "the self that is seen," the self that is experienced by others and that exists in relation with others. The loss of relationships with others is therefore not an excessive individualization but actually a loss of self and a loss of the very meaning of self.

Currently, Japan is following the suicide prevention policies put forth by western nations and international organizations such as the WHO and the UN. However, these policies may not fully address the root causes that are driving individuals in Japan to existential suffering and the contemplation of suicide. One of these root causes appears to be a lack of affiliation and a strong felt need to affiliate. In the case of Internet group suicide, this takes the form of seeking affiliation with other suicidal people who find themselves in a similar situation. If so, responses to addressing the problem of suicide in Japan must take this factor into consideration. Japanese authorities may be restricted in their attempts to curb suicide rates if they simply follow a western medical and psychiatric model that does not recognize the importance of cultural factors, the pressures of social experience, and the ill effects of social isolation in the lives and minds of contemporary Japanese.

## NOTES

1. An anonymous poem posted on the suicide website "Ghetto," <http://www.cotodama.org> (dated July 14, 2006).

## REFERENCES

- AERA. (2003, August 18–25). *Shi ni Itaru Wake* [Reasons to Reach Death].
- Asahi. (2003). April 24. Retrieved January 1, 2009 from: <http://www.happy-campus.co.jp/docs/963400369997@hc08/18202/>.
- Asakura, K. (2005). *Jisatsu no Shisou* [Ideology of suicide]. Tokyo: Ota Shuppan.
- Baumeister, R., & Leary, M.R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 497–529.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

## OZAWA-DE SILVA: INTERNET GROUP SUICIDE IN JAPAN

- Buckley, S. (2009). Preface to the 2009 Paperback Edition. In S. Buckley (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Japanese Culture* (pp. xxx–xxxvi). New York: Routledge.
- Cabinet Office, The. (2007). *Jisatu Taisaku Hakusho* [White paper on suicide prevention]. Tokyo: Saeki Insatu Habushiki Gaisha.
- Cho, Y. (2005). *Seishin Igaku kara mita Jittai ni kansuru Kenkyū* [Research on actual conditions from a psychiatric perspective]. In S. Ueda (Ed.), *Web Saito wo Kaishiteno Fukusuu Douji Jisatu no Jittai to Yobō ni Kansuru Kenkyū Hōkokusho* [Research report on the actual condition and prevention for the multiple-simultaneous suicide via Internet websites] (pp. 7–17). Tokyo: National Institution of Mental Health, NCNP.
- Cho, Y. (2006). *Hito ha naze jisatsu suru noka* [Why do people commit suicide?]. Tokyo: Bensei Shuppan.
- Con, I. (2006). *Shinu Jiyū to iu Na no Sukui* [Salvation in the name of “freedom or death”]. Tokyo: Kawade Shobō.
- Cooley, C. H. (1983). Looking-glass self. In C. H. Cooley (Ed.), *Human nature and the social order* (pp. 183–185). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Doi, T. (1971). *Amae no Kōzō* [Anatomy of dependency]. Tokyo: Kōbundō.
- Durkheim, E. (1951). *Suicide: A study in sociology*. New York: The Free Press.
- Fukunaga, T., & Hayashi, N. (2009). *Ryūka Suiso Jisatu Jiken no Bunseki* [Analysis of hydrogen-sulfide suicide]. In T. Takeshima (Ed.), *Netto Sedai no Jisatu Kanren Kōdō to Yobō no Arigata ni Kansuru Kenkyū* [Research on the suicide-related behaviors among Internet generation and prevention] (pp. 7–20). Tokyo: National Institution of Mental Health, NCNP.
- Hamaguchi, E. (1982). *Kanjin Shugi no Shakai Nihon* [Japan, society of contextualism]. Tokyo: TōyōKeizai Shinpou Sha.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time* (John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson, Trans.). New York: Harper & Row. (Original work published 1927)
- Horiguchi, I., & Akamatsu, R. (2005). Shakai ni okeru Jittai ni Kansuru Kenkyū (1): Shinbun ni Okeru Houdō no Jittai [Research on actual conditions in society: Actual conditions of news reports]. In S. Ueda (Ed.), *Web Saito wo Kaishiteno Fukusuu Douji Jisatu no Jittai to Yobō ni Kansuru Kenkyū Hōkokusho* [Research report on the actual condition and prevention for the multiple-simultaneous suicide via Internet websites] (pp. 19–26). Tokyo: National Institution of Mental Health, NCNP.
- Horiguchi, I., Cho, K., Akamatsu, R., & Emoto, M. (2005). Shakai ni okeru Jittai ni Kansuru Kenkyū (3): Daigakusei wo Taishō toshita Focus Group Interview Chōsa [Research on actual conditions in society: Survey of focus group interviews targeting the college students]. In S. Ueda (Ed.), *Web Saito wo Kaishiteno Fukusuu Douji Jisatu no Jittai to Yobō ni Kansuru Kenkyū Hōkokusho* [Research report on the actual condition and prevention for the multiple-simultaneous suicide via Internet websites] (pp. 19–26). Tokyo: National Institution of Mental Health, NCNP.
- Horiguchi, I., & Emoto, M. (2005). Shakai ni okeru Jittai ni Kansuru Kenkyū (2): Terebi ni Okeru Houdō no Jittai [Research on actual conditions in society: Actual conditions of TV reports]. In S. Ueda (Ed.), *Web Saito wo Kaishiteno*

## TRANSCULTURAL PSYCHIATRY 47(3)

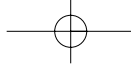
- Fukusuu Douji Jisatu no Jittai to Yobō ni Kansuru Kenkyū Hōkokusho* [Research report on the actual condition and prevention for the multiple-simultaneous suicide via Internet websites] (pp. 31–49). Tokyo: National Institution of Mental Health, NCNP.
- Jisatutaisakugaiyou. (2006). *Ikiyasui Shakai no Genjitu wo Mezashite* [Aiming for the society for comfortable living]. Retrieved March 16, 2008 from: [www8.cao.go.jp/jisatsutaisaku/sougou/taisaku/kaigi\\_2/data/s1.pdf](http://www8.cao.go.jp/jisatsutaisaku/sougou/taisaku/kaigi_2/data/s1.pdf).
- Joiner, T. (2005). *Why people die by suicide*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kagawa, R., & Mori, K. (2004). *Netto Ohji to Keitai Hime: Higeiki wo fusagutame no Chie* [Internet king and mobile phone princess: Wisdom for preventing tragic]. Tokyo: Chuo Koron-sha.
- Kimura, B. (1972). *Hito to Hito no Aida: Seishin Byōriteki Nihonron* [The space between people]. Tokyo: Kōbundō. Netto Sedai no Jisatu Kanren Kōdō to Yobō no Arigkata ni Kansuru Kenkyū [Research on suicide-related behavior among the Internet generation and its prevention].
- Kirmayer, L. J. (2002). Psychopharmacology in a globalizing world: The use of antidepressants in Japan. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 39(3), 295–322.
- Kirmayer, L. J., Boothroyd, L. J., & Stephen Hodgins, S. (1998). Attempted suicide among Inuit youth: Psychosocial correlates and implications for prevention. *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 43, 816–822.
- Kitanaka, J. (2006). *Society in distress: The psychiatric production of depression in contemporary Japan*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Department of Anthropology, McGill University.
- Kitanaka, J. (2008). *Suicide of resolve: Medico-legal disputes regarding “overwork suicide” in twentieth-century Japan*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Kleinman, A. (2001). Preface. In Institute of Medicine (Ed.), *Reducing Suicide: A National Imperative* (pp.4–7). Washington, DC: The National Academic Press.
- Kondo, D. (1990). *Crafting selves: Power, gender, and discourses of identity in a Japanese workplace*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Kral, M. (1994). Suicide as social logic. *Suicide & Life-threatening Behavior*, 24(3), 245–255.
- Lebra, Takie Sugiyama. (1982). *Japanese patterns of behavior*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Long, S. (2001). Negotiating the “good death”: Japanese ambivalence about new ways to die. *Ethnology*, 40(4), 271–289.
- Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion and motivation. *Psychological Review*, 98(2): 224–253.
- Matumoto, T., & Katumata, Y. (2009). Jisatu Risuku no takai Wakamono-tachi no Tokuchō ni Kansuru Kenkyū [Research on characteristics of high-risk suicide youth]. In T. Takeshima (Ed.), *Netto Sedai no Jisatu Kanren Kōdō to Yobō no Arigkata ni Kansuru Kenkyū* [Research on the suicide-related behaviors among Internet generation and prevention] (pp. 21–35). Tokyo: National Institution of Mental Health, NCNP.

## OZAWA-DE SILVA: INTERNET GROUP SUICIDE IN JAPAN

- Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self, and society* (Charles W. Morris, Ed.). Chicago, U+IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Motohashi, Y. (2006). *Stop: Jisatsu* [Stop: Suicide]. Tokyo: Kaimeisha.
- Muta, T. (2004). *Netto Izon no Kyofu* [Fear of the Internet addiction]. Tokyo: Kyuiku Shuppan.
- Nakane, C. (1967). *Tate Shakai no Ningen Kankei* [Human relationships in the vertical society]. Tokyo: Kōdansha Shinsho.
- Niezen, R. (2009). Suicide as a way of belonging: Causes and consequences of cluster suicides in Aboriginal communities. In L. Kirmayer & G. G. Valaskakis (Eds.) *Healing traditions: The mental health of aboriginal peoples in Canada*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Obeyesekere, G. (1985). Depression, Buddhism, and the work of culture in Sri Lanka. In A. Kleinman & B. Good (Eds.), *Culture and depression*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Okamoto, M., & Inagaki, M. (2009). Internet heno acusesu kaiseki ni kansuru kenkyū [Research analysis of Internet access]. In T. Takeshima (Ed.), *Netto Sedai no Jisatu Kanren Kōdō to Yobō no Arigata ni Kansuru Kenkyū* [Research on the suicide-related behaviors among Internet generation and prevention] (pp. 47–55). Tokyo: National Institution of Mental Health, NCMH.
- Okonogi, K. (2005). *Keitai Netto Ningen no Seishin Bunseki* [Psychoanalysis of mobile phone and Internet people]. Tokyo: Asahi Shinbun-sha.
- Ozawa-de Silva, C. (2007). Demystifying Japanese therapy: An analysis of Naikan and the Ajase Complex through Buddhist thought. *Ethos*, 35(4), 411–446.
- Ozawa-de Silva, C. (2008). Too lonely to die alone: Internet suicide pacts and existential suffering in Japan. *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, 32(4), 516–551.
- Ozawa-de Silva, C., & Ozawa-de Silva, B. (2010, forthcoming). Secularizing religious practices: A study of subjectivity and existential transformation in Naikan therapy. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*.
- Pace, T. W. W., Negi L. T., Adame, D. D., Cole, S. P., Sivilli, T. I., Brown, T. D., Issa, M. J., & Raison, C. L. (2008). Effect of compassion meditation on neuroendocrine, innate immune and behavioral responses to psychosocial stress. *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, 34(1): 87–98.
- Pinguet, M. (1993). *Voluntary death in Japan*. Cambridge: Polity Press
- Rochat, P. (2009a). *Others in mind: Social origins of self-consciousness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rochat, P. (2009b). Commentary: Mutual recognition as a foundation of sociality and social comfort. In T. Striano and V. Reid (Eds.), *Social cognition: Development, neuroscience, and autism*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Sadakane, H. (2007). A sociological investigation on “group suicides through the Internet” in Japan. *Shakaigaku Hyōron*, 58(4), 593–607.
- Samuels, D. (2007, May). Let’s die together. Atlantic. Retrieved October 12, 2008 from: <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200705/group-suicide>.
- Shibui, T. (2007). *Wakamono tachi ha naze jisatsu surunoka* [Why do young people commit suicide?]. Tokyo: Nagasaki Shuppan.
- Shibui, T. (2009). *Tecchan no Ikizurasa Onlaine* [Techan’s online for hard to live]. Retrieved August 4, 2009 from: <http://shibutetu.jugem.jp/?eid=566>.

## TRANSCULTURAL PSYCHIATRY 47(3)

- Shimizu, H. (2001a). Japanese cultural psychology and empathic understanding: Implications for academic and cultural psychology. In H. Shimizu & R. Levine (Eds.), *Japanese frames of mind: Cultural perspectives on human development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shimizu, H. (2001b). Beyond individualism and sociocentrism: An ontological analysis of the opposing elements in personal experiences of Japanese adolescents. In H. Shimizu & R. Levine (Eds.), *Japanese frames of mind: Cultural perspectives on human development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shimizu, H., & Levine, R. (2001). *Japanese frames of mind: Cultural perspectives on human development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shimizu, S. (2005). *Gendai Nihon no Ningen Pataan to Jyōhō Kiki Komunikaishion* [Human relation patterns and information equipment communication for modern people]. In S.Ueda (Ed.), *Web Saito wo Kaishiteno Fukusuu Douji Jisatu no Jittai to Yobō ni Kansuru Kenkyū Hōkokusho* [Research report on the actual condition and prevention for the multiple-simultaneous suicide via Internet websites] (pp. 77–86). Tokyo: National Institution of Mental Health, NCNP.
- Suizzo, M.-A. (2004). Mother–child relationships in France: Balancing autonomy and affiliation in everyday interactions. *Ethos*, 32(3), 293–323.
- Takahashi, Y. (1997). Culture and suicide: From a Japanese psychiatrist's perspective. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 27(1), 137–145.
- Takahashi, Y. (1998). *Gunpatsu Jisatu* [Cluster suicide]. Tokyo: Chūō Shinsho.
- Takahashi, Y. (1999). *Seishounen no tameno jisatsu yobo manuaru* [A suicide manual for young people]. Tokyo: Kongo shuppan.
- Takahashi, Y. (2001). *Jisatsu no sain wo yomitoru* [Reading a signal of suicide]. Tokyo: Kodansha.
- Takahashi, Y., Hirasawa, H., Koyama, K., Senzaki, A., & Senzaki, K. (1998). Suicide in Japan: Present state and future directions for prevention. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 35(2), 271–289.
- Takeshima, T. (Ed.). (2009). *Netto Sedai no Jisatu Kanren Kōdō to Yobō no Arigkata ni Kansuru Kenkyū* [Research on the suicide-related behaviors among Internet generation and prevention]. Tokyo: National Institution of Mental Health, NCNP.
- Taylor, C. (1989). *Sources of the self: The making of modern identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ueda, S. (Ed.). (2005). *Web Saito wo Kaishiteno Fukusuu Douji Jisatu no Jittai to Yobō ni Kansuru Kenkyū Hōkokusho* [Research report on the actual condition and prevention for the multiple-simultaneous suicide via Internet websites]. Tokyo: National Institution of Mental Health, NCNP.
- Vickery, K. (2010). Widening the psychiatric gaze: Reflections on *PsychoDoctor*, depression, and recent transitions in Japanese mental health care. *Transcultural Psychiatry* (this issue).
- Wired Vision News Archives. (2006, March 14). *Nihon de Kyūzō suru Netto Jisatu: 2 nenkan de 3 baini* [Increasing Internet suicide in Japan: 3 Times in the last 2 years]. Retrieved August 4, 2009 from: <http://wiredvision.jp/archives/200603/2006031402.html>.



OZAWA-DE SILVA: INTERNET GROUP SUICIDE IN JAPAN

Yanagita, K. (2005). *Kowareru Nihonjin* [The Japanese are falling apart]. Tokyo: Shincho-sha.

Zielenziger, M. (2006). *Shutting out the sun: How Japan generated its own lost generation*. New York: Vintage.

CHIKAKO OZAWA-DE SILVA, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Cultural Anthropology and Medical Anthropology at Emory University. She received her D. Phil. in Social and Cultural Anthropology from Oxford University in 2001. Following that, she was a Visiting Research Fellow at Harvard's Department of Social Medicine, and a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the University of Chicago. Her academic vision is to contribute to cross-cultural understandings of health and illness, especially mental illness, and make a contribution to the field of medical anthropology by bringing Western and Asian (particularly Japanese and Tibetan) perspectives on the mind-body, religion, medicine, therapy, and health and illness into fruitful dialogue. *Address:* Department of Anthropology, 1557 Dickey Drive, Atlanta, GA 30322, USA. [E-mail: [cozawad@emory.edu](mailto:cozawad@emory.edu)]

